Saskatchewan Education

Beyond Bias

Informational Guidelines for Reducing Negative Bias in Instructional Materials

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The Need For Specific Guidelines

In its review of instructional materials dealing with Native peoples, the Community Education Branch of Saskatchewan Education recognizes the need for an outline of specific kinds of information about Native peoples. This information could serve as a reference guide for individuals in the field of education called upon to check instructional materials for quality and accuracy.

In its effort to support the growing demand by educators for materials which portray all peoples fairly, the Community Education Branch has identified broad areas in which bias with respect to Native peoples occurs.

It is commonly known that various groups of people differing in age, sex, culture and capability have acquired a poor image through biased treatment in various forms of the media and in a multitude of instructional materials. What is needed is an analytical tool to help make plain the nature of prejudicial thinking that has come to be associated with each group. With this in mind the following informational guidelines with respect to Native peoples is presented.

It is hoped they will assist teachers, curriculum writers and school librarians in their ongoing task of selecting and preparing bias-free materials for students.

How To Use These Guidelines

The outline consists of broad categories supported by points of information showing how bias has occurred historically and what its effects have been upon the image of Native peoples. The outline includes the terms used in reference to Native peoples, the interpretation placed upon their traditions, institutions and achievements and the use of language itself. Instructional materials should be checked against the following categories.

Check Terms

The way a people are referred to determines how they are perceived by others. Use of special terms over time can create a mindset which will either support or detract from the way a people wish to be perceived.

- The inappropriate use of umbrella terms such as *Indians* and *Natives* imply that people indigenous to the Americas are the same culturally, politically and historically.
- The appropriate use of terms specifying national origins and political and legal status will accomplish two important things in respect of Native Peoples:
  - Support their diversity.
  - Affirm their continued presence.
- *Aboriginal Peoples* in Saskatchewan are composed of the Assiniboine, the Cree, the Saulteaux, the Dakota, the Dene and the Metis.
- *Legally-recognized groups* are the Status Indians, the Non-Status Indians and the Metis.
- **Although none of the foregoing terms indicate what the various groups originally called themselves, they underscore important distinctions and are therefore acceptable.**
- Certain umbrella terms are accepted for practical purposes:
  - The terms *Indians* or *Indian Peoples* apply when a generalization holds true for all Indians indigenous to the Americas regardless of status. (*Indian* may be defined as a person registered as an Indian according to the *Indian Act* ie. a Status Indian. The term *Registered* and *Treaty* are also used).
  - The term *Native Peoples*, used in a generic sense, applies when a generalization holds true for all groups regardless of legal, historical and political distinctions. It includes Status and Non-Status Indians, Inuit and Metis. In this sense, the term *aboriginal or indigenous peoples* may be used as well.

- ☐ The term *Indian/Native* has been used as a term of convenience retaining significant distinctions. In similar instances, the term *Indian and Metis* would be considered appropriate.
- ☐ In contemporary times, the term *First Nations* is being used with increasing frequency by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations.

Check Value Judgements Placed on Achievements

The context in which a peoples' achievements are judged can alter the perception of their true significance. If, for example, a peoples' accomplishments are placed outside the context of a flourishing civilization, one is led to believe that such achievements cannot be considered within the domains of Art, Science and Mathematics. Many self-evident truths concerning the achievements of Native Peoples are shrouded over by a lack of *proper context*.

When achievements of Native Peoples are listed in unrelated sequences such as *snowshow, Red River Cart, canoe, maize, quinine, chickle, kayak, calendar, lacrosse...*, it is hard to see the following:

- ☐ These are products of specialization in various fields of study such as horticulture, pharmacology, technology, etc.
- ☐ These achievements have a scientific and/or mathematical base.
- ☐ These achievements supported the self-sufficiency and independence of the people who produced them.
- ☐ Achievements contained within such lists are not necessarily finite.

- When *creative works* in art, dance, music and drama are viewed solely as products of cultural divergence, it is difficult to infer the following:
  - ☐ The works embody universal aesthetic principles.
  - ☐ The works represent refinement of a people's philosophical and aesthetic thought.
  - ☐ The works can stand on their own as artistic accomplishments once they have passed the test of time.
- When *traditional medical practices* are viewed from a *chants and charms* perspective, one is led to believe that they lacked a scientific base altogether. This results in important facts being overlooked:
  - ☐ Indian medical specialists developed and refined drugs that are still in use today.
  - ☐ Psychoanalytic theories developed by them predate similar theories advanced by modern psychotherapy.
- When the *contributions* of Native Peoples are presented as lists of objects which do not include land, their contributions are viewed as being limited to the past. On the contrary:
  - ☐ The contributions of Native Peoples are ongoing.
  - ☐ The land and its resources continue to benefit everyone.

Check Value-Judgements Regarding Socio-Political Traditions and Institutions

The formal structures devised by people to facilitate social interaction can be characterized as being random, ill-defined and inefficient. Many of the inaccurate assumptions regarding the socio-political traditions and institutions of Native peoples have been brought to light by recent research:

- In the past, it was generally accepted that early aboriginal peoples had no contact with other peoples prior to the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Recent anthropological evidence however supports claims of prior *inter-continental* exchanges among them.
- Historical portrayals of many Indian Nations as being *warlike* or *childlike* advances the notion that they lacked ability to maintain peace among themselves. In reality, the various Nations developed and maintained peace-keeping strategies on an international scale.
- The view that all Native Peoples exercised only casual methods of self-rule, supports the misconception that they lacked *sophisticated governmental structures and processes*. In fact, some developed highly sophisticated forms of government, as indicated below:
  - They used concensual decision-making processes based on democratic forms of self-government.
  - Their models of government were studied and incorporated into the constitution of the United States of America.
- Historical accounts of interactions among the Native Peoples are generally written in terms of men which suggests that only one segment of society exercised social control. It is now understood that, in most cases, the elderly, the women and the children had *great influence in their societies* as well.
  - The children were looked upon as sacred gifts bestowed upon society therefore each and every member of society was held responsible for their moral development.
  - The elders, both men and women, were the central figures to be consulted on all matters pertaining to the educational, spiritual, political and domestic concerns of the people.
- The *traditional educational practices* of Native Peoples have been described as lacking in formal thought and structure. In actuality, carefully observed stages of intellectual and physical development were correlated with formal levels of training. In traditional Dakota Sioux education, for example, an age-graded system applied to all individuals from birth to death. (Partial table below.)

Age Group	**Area of Inquiry (Monitored by a Chosen Elder)**
Birth to 7 years	Internalization of the Belief System
7 to 14 years	The Foundations of Identity
14 to 20 years	Acquisition and Refinement of Skills
20 to 28 Years	Formation of Attitudes (Philosophy and Aesthetics)

- The *traditional religious thought and practice* of Native Peoples has been characterized as being idolatrous and polytheistic. The exact opposite is true:
  - Belief in one God was prevalent.
  - Everything falling within the realm of religious phenomena was held to affirm the existence of the one Creator.

Check Interpretation Regarding Land Ownership

A peoples' relationship to their land can be misinterpreted and undermined in a variety of ways. This includes questions raised with respect to the equality of the people, their claim to the land and their use of the land.

- When it is stated that the land was sparsely populated and needful of civilizing influence, the reality of diverse nations of civilized peoples populating the land is denigrated.
- When it is suggested that there is a lack of scientific evidence to support claims of *long residence* by certain groups of aboriginal peoples, recent scholarship is brought into question. In fact, there is much to support the claim made by indigenous peoples that their presence in the Americas predates the time period designated by, for example, the Bering Strait Theory.
- When it is stated that the land was not used to capacity, it implies that indigenous peoples lacked economic foresight and intelligent planning. In actuality, their traditional views are based on concerns for *long term protection of the environment:*
  - The land belongs to the unborn and for that reason the balance of nature must be maintained.
  - Land, like air, must not be owned by single individuals or groups.

Check Inferential Aspects of Language

It is not only what is said or left unsaid about a people but, also, *how* language is used in reference to them which can harm their image. Aspects of tense, voice and choice of words have created all kinds of misconceptions about Native Peoples as indicated below:

- A disproportionate use of the *past tense* creates the impression that the cultural life of Native Peoples is dead.
- Use of the *passive* voice can trivialize significant aspects of a people's history in the following manner:
  - Make people and individuals seem unimportant as in *There was occasional gunfire and some people were wounded.*
  - Blot out the issues and values involved in an event as in *The treaties were signed.*
- The use of *biased words and phrases* interfere with one's capacity to make clear judgements about a people and their actions, as the following examples indicate:
  - Catch phrases such as the *Indian Menace* or the *Indian Character,* which subtract the human dimension, uproots the idea that good and bad individuals exist among all peoples.
  - Words such as *brave, squaw* and *papoose* detract from the sense of normalcy inherent in their common everyday counterparts — man, woman and baby.
  - Words such as *primitive, backward* or *massacre,* stand in the way of one's ability to visualize individuals and events as though they have positive aspects as well.
  - Unremitting use of qualifiers such as *intelligent, articulate* and *well-mannered* detract from the idea that such qualities are prevalent among all peoples and not restricted to rare and isolated cases among them.

Check For Stereotyping In Visuals

Mass media productions dealing with Native peoples should be evaluated before being accepted as illustrative materials in the classroom.

- **The Cultural Authenticity Angle:**

  Depictions of cultural settings should be assessed for accurate portrayal of related artifacts such as tools, dress and shelter. A setting which includes a Plains Indian tipi, a Navajo rug and a West Coast totem pole, for example, blurs cultural distinctions.

- **The Stage-of-Human-Development Angle:**

  Caricatures showing people involved in immoderate behaviours such as grimacing, crouching, running, hiding, or loitering should be replaced by imagery which depicts the full range of human behaviour.

- **The Capacity-for-Change Angle:**

  Native Peoples should be depicted in varied communities, in a variety of occupations and professions within a broad range of economic achievement.

- **The Innocent Witticisms Angle:**

  Popular catchwords and phrases such as *acting like a bunch of wild Indians* or *going on the warpath* perpetuates prejudicial thinking.

- **The Humour-Fantasy Angle:**

  Visuals which are meant to be decorative, fanciful or comical can sanction the ridicule of a people — ie. People brandishing tomahawks, cartoon figures of animals wearing the traditional dress of a people, etc.

Check For Ethnocentric Perspective In Children's Literature

The notion that there is one normal lifestyle or culture against which all others are to be negatively compared finds expression in a variety of ways. In analyzing children's literature, the following questions with respect to characters, action and setting may be asked:

- **The Characters**

  Are positive physical and personal attributes, resourcefulness in solving problems and the ability to assume leadership roles distributed across a range of cultural, age and sex differences?

- **The Action:**

  Do active and passive roles, loyalties and ability to resolve conflict cross barriers of cultural, age and sex differences?

- **The Setting:**

  Is the potential for happiness, dignity and commitment to one's environment depicted as being possible across a broad range of socio-economic conditions?

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